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SUBJECT: LEBANON: SINIORA WITH WELCH URGES USG SUPPORT FOR
ARAB LEAGUE INITIATIVE

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Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

1. (C) In an April 17 meeting with NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora asked for the U.S. and the international community to continue to support the components of the Arab League Initiative (ALI) in sequence, specifically the election of a president, followed by the formation of a national unity government and a national debate on electoral law reform. Accepting praise for his March 29 speech on the eve of the Arab League Summit in Damascus, Siniora said his seven-point plan, the Taif Accord, and the 1949 armistice should serve as the basis for the GOL's foreign policy. Siniora was supportive of a "Friends of Lebanon" meeting during the Secretary's upcoming visit to the region, agreed that the GOL should be represented, and provided a list of discussion themes. Though he called Berri's national dialogue proposal "an insult to our intelligence," Siniora said he would be willing to engage in a dialogue that had clear, reasonable objectives. Siniora ended with a long discourse on the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) and repeated his call for U.S. support for a resolution to the Shebaa Farms issue. End Summary.

2. (C) The Prime Minister and Senior Advisors Mohammed Chatah and Rola Noreddine met with A/S Welch, Charge Sison, NEA Staff Assistant, Pol/Econ Chief and Special Assistant in his office at the Grand Serail. Saying that he was feeling particularly strong and serene, despite the current pressures, Siniora read with delight the supportive language for Lebanon that had been included in the April 16 Joint Statement between the White House and the Holy See.

USG Support Remains Strong

3. (C) A/S Welch opened the meeting by praising Siniora for his March 29 statesman-like speech on the eve of the Arab League Summit in Damascus, calling it a welcome and comprehensive statement of Lebanon's foreign policy and national interests for an international audience. A/S Welch said he had returned to Beirut to demonstrate that U.S.

support for the GOL remains strong. Despite recent erroneous press statements attributed to the Secretary, the U.S. continues to place an emphasis on the immediate election of a president. He also assured PM Siniora that Lebanon remains a top priority in the region and that the U.S. will continue to provide economic and political support for Lebanon's national institutions. A/S Welch said that, while in Lebanon, he hoped to receive a brief on March 14's strategic planning process during the current political vacuum, which has no end in sight. He placed an emphasis on strengthening the coalition's unity, especially among Christians. Finally, he asked for the PM's views on the proposed "Friends of Lebanon" meeting on the margins of the April 22 Iraq Neighbors meeting in Kuwait.

Key Themes for a "Friends of Lebanon" Conference

14. (C) Siniora agreed that the Arab League Summit had recalibrated the balance between Syria and Lebanon, adding that he had waited until the last minute to decide whether to attend so that his absence would be heard loudly and the message to the world would be that the real issue in Lebanon is Syrian interference. The Arab states "get" this to varying degrees, he said.

15. (C) Siniora and Chatah said they had not been fully briefed on the French proposal for a "Friends of Lebanon" conference in Kuwait, but they agreed that the GOL should be represented at the table. Siniora said it is no longer "just enough" for the international community to support the provisions of UNSCR 1701. The seven-point plan he proposed during the 2006 Rome conference conflict, Taif, and the 1949 Armistice also should be recognized. The GOL is under great strain and it must receive more assistance if it is to withstand the current pressures. "We don't want to be a battleground for outside power struggles." Chatah added that

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continuous and coordinated political and economic international support should be provided and discussion should begin at the "Friends" meeting to determine what sort of mechanism can be used to achieve that goal. Chatah thought this has the potential to turn into "an important win for the region." Noreddine added that the public was starting to lose confidence in the Special Tribunal. "The delays make people think that the Tribunal is being held in reserve as a card to play in a future deal with Syria." She urged attendees to dispel the rumor.

16. (C) PM Siniora also asked for the U.S. to be more forward leaning on support for the ALI. "Lack of U.S. support, real or misinterpreted, is playing badly here," he said. The ALI should be supported as a consensus plan which has the support of the Arab world to avoid the appearance of divisions between pro-U.S. and pro-Iran Arab states. However, it should be clear that the presidential election is first, it should put the GOL at the forefront (rather than focus on internal divisions) and it should be clear that Syria is the real problem to get out of the quagmire of internal debates over cabinet formation and the electoral law. He asked A/S Welch to seize opportunities to strengthen public statements which reflect U.S. support.

"When You're Speaking with the Others..."

17. (C) When asked, PM Siniora outlined a number of key points that he hoped A/S Welch would raise with other Lebanese interlocutors during his visit.

-- Speaker Berri: Siniora asked for one clear and simple message to be delivered. Berri must open the parliament and free other Lebanese national institutions from this current morass.

-- The Patriarch: Siniora asked for movement from the Patriarch on proposals to fill slain MP Pierre Gemayel's cabinet seat with another Maronite Christian. "We need to do this to preserve confessional unity."

-- Walid Jumblatt: Siniora wants Jumblatt to stay focused on big-picture national issues without getting distracted by smaller side issues of lesser importance. "He should stay on the main roads. He'll only get into an accidents if he keeps racing down the back alleys."

-- General Michel Sleiman: Siniora thinks Sleiman made his point to the opposition and the Syrians when he announced that he would formally retire from the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in August, whether or not the presidential election had been decided. "Enough," said Siniora. "He should stay quiet now and not back himself into a corner with any more ultimatums." (Note: Siniora said the Cabinet could call Sleiman back into service after he retires. When he reenters, he will be the most senior officer and will automatically become the LAF Commander again because of his rank. What the Cabinet cannot do is directly "rename" him LAF Commander under the current political system. Sleiman himself appeared to reject this scenario in a subsequent meeting with A/S Welch, septel, stating that only parliament has the authority to extend his mandate. End Note.)

Berri's Proposal Holds No Attraction

18. (C) PM Siniora said that Speaker Berri's most recent proposal for a National Dialogue was ill-conceived and lacked clear objectives for discussion. PM Siniora said he was willing to engage in a productive dialogue session, but only if it was not presented as a PR ploy that is an "insult to our intelligence." Siniora said that he had been trying other ways to keep Lebanese political life alive during the current crisis. He has been encouraging a new mix of ministerial meetings in an effort to bring fresh perspectives to some key issues.

19. (C) PM Siniora touched briefly on electoral reform issues, which have been in the headlines since inclusion in the ALI. Most March 14 leaders seem to be moving in favor of a return to the 1960 Electoral Law. Siniora said that this was a bad

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idea. Although it does provide some clarity on the contentious redistricting issues, it fails to take into account the important provisions agreed upon in the 1989 Taif Accords. "This is a move backwards," he said. In terms of other reforms, he told us that a one man/one vote model would not work. "It's not the way to breed moderate politics in Lebanon."

110. (C) PM Siniora also told A/S Welch that the opposition was "digging in for the long haul." With the Arab League Summit in the past, the next big international event on the public horizon is the U.S. elections. "Not necessarily because they think there will be a change in policy, but because they have everything to gain by using this as a delay tactic. Lebanon is being held for ransom in a regional power struggle."

Moving Forward

111. (C) "There is a change in the air," Siniora told us. Michel Murr's recent "divorce" from Michel Aoun and March 14's "landslide" victory in the recent engineering labor union elections have shaken the opposition a bit. "Their tent city in the downtown area failed to produce meaningful results. Their cabinet defections failed to oust the government. They are starting to realize that they come off as the bad guys."

¶12. (C) Unfortunately, this "change in the air" can also serve to increase the anxiety levels of average citizens who don't know what to expect next. PM Siniora said that the GOL must use this opportunity to consolidate its position and begin to address its own internal problems. "We must focus on economic and social issues. And we must convince people that the GOL is functioning and responsive to their needs. We want to be viewed as motivated and organized."

¶13. (C) Siniora, indicating that the absence of even one minister could prevent his cabinet from functioning, said he was convinced the Patriarch and other Maronites were moving towards consensus on the need to replace slain Industry Minister Pierre Gemayel. "The Patriarch is very much moving in that direction," he said.

¶14. (C) Also high on his agenda, PM Siniora said that he would ask the EU to work towards a unified approach and message for Syria and Iran. He will host resident EU ambassadors at a luncheon on April 18 to emphasize this point.

Stressing Shebaa Farms

¶15. (C) The PM then dusted off his favorite talking points on Shebaa Farms, typically brought out for visitors from Washington. USG economic and political support for Lebanon is critical, but all problems in the region stem from the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. On-going Israeli operations in Gaza are contributing to the rise of extremism, according to Siniora. People have given up on peaceful, civilized solutions promoted by civil society and they are turning to extremist violence in the hope that something new will produce results.

¶16. (C) PM Siniora said, "If the U.S. is really serious about helping Lebanon, it will work on the Shebaa Farms issue. The current situation allows our Syrian and Iranian enemies to paint themselves as 'defenders of the faith', but Hizballah's reason for existence will diminish if you solve this problem. You could turn us, the Lebanese, into the heroes in the region if you succeed."

¶17. (C) A/S Welch assured PM Siniora that Shebaa Farms remained "on the table" during the MEPP negotiations. He also urged PM Siniora to work with other Arab leaders in the region to increase their financial support to the Palestinian Authority, which is playing a key role in providing security and humanitarian services to the Palestinian population. The Arab nations must become more involved in the search for a solution.

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Comment

¶18. (C) Siniora was quite relaxed during the meeting. His recent tour of the Arab region appears to have bolstered his confidence in their commitment to Lebanon. With the continuation of the current political vacuum likely, he seems to be looking at some domestic and international issues with a longer-term lens. End Comment.

¶19. (U) A/S Welch has not had the opportunity to clear this cable.
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